

Burger King: Seeking Consistency in Leadership and Image

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**Abstract**

This paper will examine the image changes Burger King has undertaken in an attempt to reverse recent profit losses. Reasons for Burger King's struggles will be discussed, namely its lack of vision and frequent leadership changes. Finally, solutions to Burger King's fundamental flaws will be offered based upon research on change management, decision-making, and leadership methods.

### **Burger King: Seeking Consistency in Leadership and Image**

For nearly 60 years, Burger King has served flame-broiled hamburgers at an affordable price. In this sense, the fast-food chain best known for its over-sized sandwich has been nothing but consistent. Beyond the broiler, however, Burger King's most notable trait is its inconsistency (Horovitz, 2007). The corporation's longest CEO tenure was four years (Gross, 2004). When Brad Blum took over the position in 2004, he was the ninth to lead in 15 years. Since then, five others have held the job – the most recent being a former railroad executive with no fast-food experience (Horovitz, 2012).

Some say the overriding motivation of several owners was to deprive Burger King of capital in order to pay parent shareholders quickly (Penney & Green, 2012). Others trace the chain's decline to the mid-90s, when then-owner Diageo PLC neglected the company and its tanking sales (Horovitz, 2007). Regardless of one's perspective, such a degree of ownership turnover leaves no time to develop a coherent strategy, let alone implement one.

This paper will examine how inconsistency of leadership and its byproduct, a lack of a company vision, have overwhelmingly contributed to Burger King's repeated financial struggles. Now more than ever, as the chain launches its broadest menu expansion in its 58-years (Choi, 2012) and makes its biggest communications push in its history (Horovitz, 2012), Burger King must establish effective leadership strategies and implement and diffuse a compelling vision. Addressing these issues will have a direct affect on its image, which will translate to consumers and increase profits.

### **Burger King's History**

James McLamore and David Edgerton founded Burger King Corporation in 1954. The men had been Miami, Florida franchisees of the restaurant's precursor, Insta-Burger King. Their

business strategy was simple: attract postwar baby boomer families with reasonably priced, swiftly served broiled hamburgers (“Burger King Corporation”). Their plan was not unique; however, McLamore and Edgerton set their chain apart by being the first to offer dining rooms and, in 1957, the Original Whopper Sandwich. A year after the iconic burger appeared on Burger King’s first-ever television advertisements, McLamore and Edgerton expanded their five Florida restaurants into a nationwide enterprise. When Burger King was sold to the Pillsbury Company in 1967, it was the third largest fast-food chain in the United States with 275 locations.

Pillsbury owned Burger King for 30 years. Yet problems within the corporation’s ranks quickly emerged. In 1970, Burger King battled with a pair of franchisees, Billy and Jimmy Trotter. The Trotters had bought up restaurants around the country before attempting to buy the chain for \$100 million (“Burger King Corporation”). Pillsbury refused and sued a group of Boston franchisees who had sold to the Trotters, claiming Pillsbury had the right to refuse the sale. The Trotters compromised and relinquished their Boston holdings.

The end result reinforced Pillsbury’s transactional and authoritative management style. It also paved a future path of contentious relationships with franchisees (Baertlein, 2011). Through its actions, Burger King advanced the interests of itself and individual storeowners, yet was not interested in a deep or enduring link (Denhardt, Denhardt & Aristigueta, 2009). With the 1977 addition of Donald Smith, a hard-hitting executive from current number-one fast food chain McDonald’s, Burger King introduced a more demanding franchisee contract which stipulated “that franchisees may not own other restaurants and must live within an hour’s drive of their franchise” (“Burger King Corporation,” para. 13). To many franchisees, the company became overbearing, a negative aspect of the authoritative leadership style which can “undermine the egalitarian spirit of an effective team” (Goleman, 2000, p. 84). This feeling of franchisee

oppression has persisted throughout the company's history (Baertlein, 2011; Horowitz, 2007; Mitchell, 2010; Penney & Green, 2012; Romeo, 1988).

### **Rapid Ownership Changes**

In 1989, Grand Metropolitan PLC acquired Pillsbury and expanded Burger King's 5,500-restaurant empire into Europe. Less than ten years later, Grand Metropolitan PLC merged with Guinness & Co. to form Diageo PLC. Diageo became a world leader in branded food and drinks and moved Burger King Corporation's ownership to Europe ("About BK"). With each merger, even as Burger King grew, it became a smaller piece of the overall company (Gross, 2004). In 2000, Diageo cast it aside altogether, placing Burger King on the auction block. The chain was bought in 2002 for \$1.5 billion by a trio of private equity investors – Texas Pacific Group, Bain Capital, and Goldman Sachs Capital Partners, who moved Burger King back to the U.S.

In 2006, ownership took Burger King public after an IPO valued the company at about \$2.3 billion. Just four years later, Burger King was sold once more, this time for \$3.3 billion to investment firm 3G Capital, again making the chain a privately held company. Profit declines still stung; U.S. sales were \$7.9 billion in 2003, down from \$8.6 billion in 2002 and barely above 1997 figures (Gross, 2004). Stores had also been shuttering. Between 2001 and 2003, more than 400 closed. In the midst of transitioning to new owner 3G, Burger King's same store sales in North America fell 5.3 percent at the end of its 2010 second-quarter (Brandau, 2011). All in all, Burger King's sales among fast-food chains fell from 17 percent in the early-2000s to 12 percent in 2011. McDonald's share, on the other hand, rose from 42 to 50 percent (Choi, 2012).

In early April 2012, 3G announced its plan to reenter the public sphere through a merger with Justice Holdings, a London-based publicly traded company (De La Merced, 2012). 3G received \$1.4 billion in cash and maintained control of 71% of Burger King. Currently, the

company operates more than 12,500 restaurants worldwide and reported annual sales of \$8.4 billion in 2011, slightly below Wendy's \$8.5 billion. The difference is significant; for the first time since 1972, Burger King is not the second-largest fast food chain in North America.

### **The Need for Change**

As stated in this paper's introduction, Burger King's financial struggles begin with its failure to establish a clear vision. Doppelt (2010) stated that a vision is "a simple, lucid and compelling picture of a future condition that people feel committed to achieve" (p. 148). Leaders are responsible for not only articulating a vision, but for inspiring others to adopt it by carrying it through (Denhardt, et al., 2009). Burger King's ever-changing leadership undermined its ability to establish and communicate a consistent and motivational vision to its franchisees. This lack of direction and mission bled into the public sphere, causing consumers to be confused about Burger King's image. These failures resulted in declining profits.

Earlier this year, former CEO Brad Blum said: "Burger King has got to focus on who they are and what sets them apart" (Horovitz, 2012). Meeting this objective may be the goal of the company's new marketing campaign, which has been called its most ambitious (Choi, 2012; Horovitz, 2012; Schultz, 2012). Before examining this campaign, it is important to review the main reasons why it and other organizational changes were necessary.

### **Lack of Vision**

Burger King's founder James McLamore (1996) wrote in his autobiography about frustrations of franchises, saying in 1992: "The challenge before management was to come up with plans and ideas that would stimulate sales and restore our *battered image* [emphasis added]" (p. 247). Curiously, in the index of McLamore's book, there is no mention of "Vision." Such an

omission helps explain why Burger King has struggled with its image. Not only has it churned through leaders, but from its very beginnings, Burger King had no stated vision.

Doppelt (2010) wrote: “Only after powerful...teams are organized can an inspiring new purpose and vision for the organization be adopted” (p. 107). Through its constant ownership changes, any chance of these powerful teams being established was negated. With years of ambiguity defining its image and high turnover disrupting its strategy, Burger King has developed an organizational culture built on constant leadership changes, a support system that makes Burger King fickle in both its message and operational approach (Juarez, 2011). Culture shapes the values, attitudes and actions of the organization’s members. In Burger King’s case, these members are its franchisees. Even McLamore (1998) realized they’d been mistreated, writing “a sizable majority of Burger King’s franchisees...felt that they had been beaten up pretty badly over the past several years” (p. 217).

### **Leadership Volatility**

Gross (2004) wrote, “It’s abundantly clear that Burger King has lacked the sort of managerial, and especially marketing, talent that McDonald’s and Wendy’s have” (para. 8). Deficiencies at the management level erode followers’ beliefs in a leader’s expert power, which reduces credibility. Burger King’s lawsuit against the Trotters set the company on a path of coercive power, a leadership tactic not recommended as the sole means of influence (Denhardt, et al., 2009). Clearly, this tactic has not worked. The perception of Burger King as cold and ineffective was supported in a 2010 study that showed McDonald’s significantly outperformed its competitor in both “warmth” and “competence” in consumers’ minds (Brady, 2010).

Burger King has also struggled to prove itself trustworthy – a hallmark of effective leadership. From the lawsuit targeting the Trotters to the lawsuit brought against it, the company

has had a contentious relationship with its franchisees. Trust was further reduced when, according to some reports, the last two private equity firms that bought Burger King deprived it of \$1 billion or more in capital that could have been used to improve the company's standing versus its competitors (Penney & Green, 2012).

A shortage of trust can be related to Burger King's reliance on an authority-compliance style of leadership, mapped on Blake and Mouton's (1964) managerial grid as having the highest concern for production but the lowest concern for people. Franchisees have complained about ownership being irresponsible when they've shared problems or concerns (Choi, 12). They've claimed to have "shouldered the burden of efforts by management to keep the chain competitive" (Brady, 2010, para. 8). They've also been upset about not being consulted on Burger King's advertising strategies (Horovitz, 2007).

Such complaints suggest Burger King has historically relied on monologic change communication, identified as top-down, one-way, instrumental communication (Frahm, 2011). Franchisees even sued the company in 2009 when it offered \$1 cheeseburgers, claiming that they "were being forced to sell burgers below cost [because] Burger King was out to boost revenues at their expense in an effort to please Wall Street" (Mitchell, 2010, para. 4). They eventually agreed to dismiss the lawsuit in return for more power in setting prices for cheaper items (Baertlein, 2011).

Burger King's fluctuating leadership has forced the chain to engage in a dissonant style of leadership, created when there is a lack of harmony between potential leaders and followers (Denhardt, Denhardt & Aristigueta, 2009). While this lack of harmony is a natural consequence of frequent ownership changes, the company failed to understand its impact on franchisees and effectively manage change. Had Burger King taken a systems theory approach, it may have



understood that its long-term flagging sales were not independent of other parts of its system, namely how it treated its franchisees. Acknowledging this may have slowed the company from implementing shake-ups when new ownership took over. Instead, it moved “too quickly through tough steps such as developing a clear vision or an effective strategy” (Doppelt, 2010, p. 232). As a result, Burger King is an organization in constant flux that desperately needs stability.

### **Faltering Image**

In recent years, Burger King’s marketing strategy was geared exclusively to those it termed “superfans”: 18- to 35-year-old males (Brady, 2010; Horovitz, 2007; Jargon, 2010; Juarez, 2011; Mitchell, 2010; Schultz, 2012; Snel, 2011). The company teamed with advertising agency and “creative powerhouse” (Babej, 2011, para. 2) Crispin Porter + Bogusky to create an edgy campaign strategy highlighted by television advertisements featuring a “creepy-looking king” (Brady, 2010) and online gimmicks like the Subservient Chicken. For a short period of time, this “cool” strategy seemed to work. In February 2007, Burger King reported a 12<sup>th</sup>-consecutive quarter of worldwide sales growth at stores open at least a year (Horovitz, 2007). However, Burger King failed to anticipate how the 2008 recession would affect its core demographic.

### **Failure to adapt to market**

In 2010, industry analysts said Burger King’s marketing and advertising focus alienated women, children and other customers (Jargon, 2010). Yet executives within the company’s ranks failed to notice. They also ignored the fact that from January to September 2009, 18- to 34-year-olds went to fast-food chains about 13 times per month on average, down from almost 19 times a month in 2006 (Jargon, 2010). Even during the height of Burger King’s coolness offensive,

brand expert Martin Lindstrom questioned the chain's image, indicting its leadership: "It's still a slightly schizophrenic brand" (Horovitz, 2007).

Burger King's schizophrenia is evident in its marketing history. As far back as 1988, franchisees were dissatisfied with management's advertising strategies (Romeo, 1988). Like its revolving door of CEOs, Burger King has had an array of marketing chiefs. In the late eighties, the company re-staffed the position twice in six months. It repeated history in 2011 with the dismissal of chief marketing officer Natalia Franco after only nine months (Elliott, 2011).

Burger King also failed to respond to the general demand for healthier eating options, an oversight its executives have readily admitted (Horovitz, 2012). In 2011, 9% of consumers said they wanted fresh and lighter fare (Snel, 2011), yet the company continued its focus on large portions for young males. According to Bonnie Riggs, a restaurant industry analyst at market-research firm NPD Group, young people were actually looking for healthier options, or at least what they perceived to be healthier options (Jargon, 2010). Overlooking this trend was a huge misstep, especially considering that of the 61 billion annual visits to restaurants in the United States, nearly one out of four is to a burger chain restaurant (Snel, 2011). While its competitors provided menu items in line with this movement, Burger King "failed to diversify its offerings" (Lattman & De La Merced, 2012, para. 16) and "let its menu get stale" (Choi, 2012, para. 6).

### **What Change is Needed**

Clearly, Burger King's culture of inconsistency is an epidemic that requires a cohesive and consistent change management effort by leadership. Denhardt, et al. (2009) wrote, "Three ideas seem central to bringing about change effectively. First, managers or other 'change agents' need to clarify and communicate the problems inherent in the current situation....Second,

managers should involve people throughout the organization in the change process [and]...Third, managers must recognize that people involved in change simply need time” (p. 336).

### **Creating a Compelling Vision**

Joseph Buckley, a Bear Sterns analyst, said "One thing you've gotta like about Burger King is how the brand has survived a lot of mismanagement and abuse” (as cited in Horovitz, 2007). Such a statement may be a backhanded compliment, but it also suggests a resiliency that Burger King’s stakeholders can draw from when building a stronger vision toward success. Doppelt (2010) wrote, “Without a coherent theory of success, organizations usually end up pursuing a scattered array of activities and projects that lead to marginal improvements, dead ends or outright failure” (Doppelt, 2010, p. 100). To achieve this vision, Burger King must work with its franchisees to build a stronger bond.

### **Use of various leadership styles**

Change is often accompanied by conflict, so the former cannot be managed without addressing the latter. The two also go hand-in-hand with vision. Schein (1985) wrote, “In a rapidly changing world, the leader...must not only have vision, but also be able to evolve it further as external circumstances change” (p. 407). Blake and Mouton’s managerial grid is a taxonomy for the management of conflict in organizations (Nicotera, 1993) and a pivotal model in the field of organizational communication (Amsbary, 1989). As such, Burger King should heed the authors’ recommendation to practice collaborative behavior – the best way to manage and resolve conflict (as cited in Whitworth, 2008). Barrett (2011) wrote, “All employees need to feel part of the change process, and the more they can contribute to the change discussions, the more they will start to internalize the proposed changes” (p. 369).

One way for Burger King to manage both change and conflict is through dialogic communication, which implies that “relationships matter, different perspectives matter, and power is shared among all within the organization” (Frahm, 2011, p. 138). Bokeno and Gantt (2000) held that this type of communication allows for engagement that demonstrates genuine care and respect and generates reflective discussion. Another way is to communicate with resonance, not dissonance. “Resonance enables the leader to use...expertise in pursuit of a company’s performance. It allows the leader to engage the power of all the people who work in and around the organization” (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005, p. 5).

Emphasis on relationships within an organization and engaging employees are characteristics of the affiliative leadership style, which “revolves around people” and “[builds] a sense of belonging” (Goleman, 2000, p. 84). Doppelt (2010) wrote, “Sound relationships deepen a team’s ability to think critically, resolve problems and innovate” (p. 140). This style also helps create team harmony and repair broken trust – goals Burger King has struggled to achieve.

### **Collaborative decision-making**

At this point in its current makeover, Burger King appears to be collaborating with its franchisees. According to Penney and Green (2012), franchisees like the new management team. Franchisee Tom McDonald said the attitude from the top started to change after 3G took over. The company assembled a group of 15 key executives, franchisees and suppliers to evaluate the chain's menu, item by item (Choi, 2012). In this case, Burger King abandoned its traditional coercive power tactics and singular pace-setting leadership style to embrace group decision-making, where all members make decisions, ideally through consensus (Denhardt, et al.).

Tom Versaci, chairman of the chain’s National Franchisee Association, underscored the benefits of collaborative decision-making when he praised Burger King for including franchisees

in the process of updating its menu offerings and listening to their concerns (Baertlein, 2011; Mitchell, 2010). A new company policy also gives franchisees more input on how long special deals run (Baertlein, 2011).

Burger King appears to be headed even further in this direction. William A. Ackman, a private equity investor involved in the company's latest ownership change, said the chain's new business model is to "collect fees and rents but leave most of the decision-making to local operators" (De La Merced, 2012, para. 9). In this sense, Burger King is embracing affiliative and authoritative leadership styles. The former "states the end but gives people plenty of leeway to devise their own means" and the latter "gives people the freedom to do their job in the way they think is most effective" (Goleman, 2000, p. 84).

## **Image**

In addition to addressing its leadership and decision-making shortages in effort to reach a cohesive vision, Burger King had to tackle its image of exclusively serving unhealthy food to young males. To do this, it reached out to those with the greatest say in whether or not new menu items would succeed: consumers. It also took a fresh approach to its marketing strategy, starting with hiring a new advertising firm.

### **Revamped menu and restaurant design**

On April 2, 2012, Burger King rolled out 10 new items at once, an act never done before in the history of the company (Horovitz, 2012). Each item coincided with the chain's goal to offer healthier alternatives. Some of the new options were: homestyle chicken strips, chicken snack wraps, frappes, smoothies, and salads. Many observers noted these items have been part of competitors' menus for years (Anderson, 2012). Steve Wiborg, president of Burger King's North America operations, did not shy away from the accusation: "Consumers wanted more choices,"

he said. ‘Not just healthy choices, but choices they could get at the competition’” (Choi, 2012, para. 5). The company also openly admitted that its new menu additions are aimed at a broader range of consumer groups (Snel, 2011).

Burger King representatives did not simply walk into a McDonald’s and write down all the items they wanted to sell. Company executives say the chain came up with them through extensive research, another indication that Burger King is taking the creation of its new image and vision seriously. “Over the past year, Burger King evaluated all of its ingredients from the bacon to the cheese slices it serves on its chargrilled burgers as part of a yearlong quest to reverse years of slumping sales of its Whoppers and fries” (Choi, 2012, para. 4). Even seemingly straightforward items went through several variations before the final version was selected and months were spent determining the right mix for its new line of smoothies.

Executives also hosted focus groups, a “popular method for receiving input from a large number of individuals” (Denhardt, et al., 2009, p. 129). This method of consumer feedback has advantages over surveys in that participants “tend to feel empowered” and “may query one another and explain their answers to others” (Neumann, 2006, p. 412). Burger King officials found that the Whopper was still a customer favorite, but that the chain had to “catch up in some important product categories, specifically salads, smoothies and wraps” (Schultz, 2012, para. 10).

Jordan Krolick, president of the consulting firm Tound & Drowth who held senior positions at Arby’s and McDonald’s said: ““You can change the menu...[and] the advertising, but you’re not going to get customers to see those changes without fresh, new, clean-looking facilities (as cited in Brady, 2010, para. 8). To this end, Burger King is also in the process of modernizing 7,200 of its aging stores, redesigning worker uniforms to stay cleaner, and even serving the Whopper in cardboard cartons instead of paper wrapping for the first time in 20 years

(Choi, 2012). The company is also digitizing its menu boards, making its chairs and tables mostly moveable instead of cemented to the ground, and adding chairs that feel more like couches in some stores (Horovitz, 2012). All in an effort to modernize its image.

### **Advertising**

In March 2011, Burger King announced it was cutting ties with “cool” Crispin Porter + Bogusky in favor of the more product-focused services of New York-based advertising firm McGarryBowen (Munzenrieder, 2011). The swap signaled the end of “The King,” the leering plastic-y mascot featured in most of its previous advertising efforts. McGarryBowen’s plan was to concentrate on promotion of Burger King’s actual food (Munzenrieder). “In a serious image twist, [many of Burger King’s] entire commercials show only the sights and sounds of the fresh ingredients being washed, sliced and diced” (Horovitz, 2011, para. 2).

Burger King also expanded its relationship with California ad agency Pitch by selecting it for promotions aimed at children and families over the company once in charge of these groups, Campbell Mithun (Elliott, 2011). Both moves clearly demonstrate Burger King is abandoning its courtship of “young, hungry guys” for a campaign “more culturally directed towards moms, families and Boomers” (Horovitz, 2012, para. 5).

Burger King also enlisted some A-list celebrities to help spread the word about its new menu, including David Beckham, Jay Leno, Steven Tyler, Mary J. Blige and Selma Hayek.

### **Measurement of Success**

The cost of Burger King’s image adjustment is steep: about \$750 million to fix the menu, revamp stores (\$275,000 per location), and continue its ambitious marketing campaign (Horovitz, 2012). Previously, attempts to reinvigorate the brand have failed over the long term. In 1985, Burger King developed breakfast entries and added salad bars and a “light” menu to attract

consumers seeking healthier options. The chain also began a \$100 million program to remodel most of its restaurants (“Burger King Corporation”).

But early returns suggest the new strategies may be working. The company’s BrandIndex impression score on Aug. 17, 2011, three days before it debuted its first commercial dedicated to the freshness of its food (the California Whopper), was 24.4, half of McDonald’s score and less than half of Wendy’s. During the first three weeks of the California Whopper campaign, however, Burger King’s scores climbed. With continued airing of the food-focused commercial on television, the company’s score rose to a peak of 45.1 on August 30 and ended the three-week period with a 38.4 score on September 9 (Brandau, 2011). Still, Burger King has a long ways to go to reverse its missteps in terms of vision, leadership and image.

Doppelt (2010) wrote, “Change initiatives can falter if you move too rapidly to a new phase before sufficient groundwork has been laid” (p. 108). It is imperative Burger King turn its new marketing campaign and franchisee relations into a springboard to create the consistency missing for so long within the company. Only then can a strong and compelling vision emerge. As discussed throughout this paper, the company’s history is replete with sudden changes that disrupt progress. Despite accusations that its new television ad featuring Mary J. Blige reinforced negative African American stereotypes, Burger King must remain confident in its tactics and stay the course to achieve desired positive change. Only after a sufficiently compelling case for change is established will the right people be willing to participate (Doppelt).

### **Conclusion**

This paper examined how a lack of vision and constant leadership changes factored into the need for Burger King’s recent image and marketing makeover. It reviewed the chain’s historical use of coercive power and over-reliance on an authoritative leadership style, which



tarnished its relationship with franchisees. It also recommended various tactics Burger King could employ to correct these issues.

Recently, Burger King has attempted to improve its standing with franchisees through collaborative decision-making and a balanced mix of authoritative, affiliative and democratic leadership styles. Still, the company must craft a vision that speaks to these initiatives and Burger King's goals moving forward. The company has also invested significantly in new marketing efforts, fresh menu items, and restaurant remodels in an effort to alter its unhealthy and out-of-touch image.

In the end, the ultimate measure of success will be whether or not these new methods positively impact the bottom line. Financial gains will not result from a poor image, poor franchisee relationships, and a poor product. These three factors are explicitly and irrevocably tied to profit, so Burger King must constantly – and consistently – monitor feedback and respond to concerns if the company wishes to reclaim the number two spot among North America's fast food chains. Then it must keep its eye on the broiler to remain there.

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